DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 121 UD 035 417

AUTHOR	Baron, Juliane; Sylvester, Kathleen
TITLE	Expanding the Goals of "Responsible Fatherhood" Policy: Voices from the Field in Four Cities.
INSTITUTION	Social Policy Action Network, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.; Texas Univ., Austin. Hogg Foundation for Mental Health.; McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis, MN.; William Penn Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.
PUB DATE	2002-12-00
NOTE	38p.; Also produced by National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Inc. Additional support from Ohio Childrens Foundation.
AVAILABLE FROM	Social Policy Action Network, 44 North Capital Street, Suite 309, Washington, DC 20001. Tel: 202-434-4770; Fax: 202-434-4769; e-mail: info@span-online.org; Web site: http://www.span-online.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Support; *Child Welfare; Employment Patterns; *Fathers; *Low Income Groups; *Parent Responsibility; Public Policy; *Social Services
IDENTIFIERS	*Barriers to Participation

ABSTRACT

To more fully document the experiences of low-income, noncustodial fathers and identify policy and practice changes that might help fathers build better connections to the workplace and their families, researchers interviewed fathers and the front-line workers who try to help them. Research occurred in Austin, Texas; Columbus, Ohio; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in early 2002. The goal was to identify challenges facing low-income fathers seeking to support their children and challenges facing public and private agencies working to help fathers reach that goal. Results indicate that the needs of low-income, noncustodial fathers are similar to those of their female partners. They have low educational attainment and long histories of unemployment and substance abuse. Results also show that fathers do not trust service providers, assuming that caseworkers are aligned with mothers and will do little to help them. In all four cities, surveys indicated that few programs made concrete efforts to address such barriers. In all four cities, fathers and their advocates reported that many caseworkers were neither trained nor inclined to work with fathers. Private sector employers were reluctant to hire low-income men, preferring to hire women and part-time teenagers. Recommendations for Congress, state legislatures, and state-run and nonprofit programs are included. (Contains 41 endnotes.) (SM)

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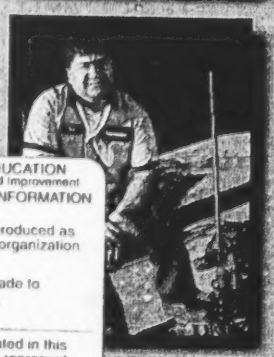
Expanding the Goals of "Responsible Fatherhood" Policy

Voices from the Field in Four Cities

Prepared by the **Social Policy Action Network** and
the **National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families**

Juliane Baron and Kathleen Sylvester



DECEMBER 2002

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2

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Acknowledgments

The National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families and the Social Policy Action Network would like to thank the following foundations for their support of this project. We are grateful to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, the Ohio Children's Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the William Penn Foundation.

As always, Ralph Smith and Maurice Moore of the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided support and guidance for the project.

In Texas, special thanks to Dr. Marion Coleman of the Hogg Foundation and Michael Hayes of the Office of the Attorney General, who served as a key project advisor. Robin Rosell of the People's Community Clinic generously agreed to be our community partner, and Celia Lovett of the Hogg Foundation used her considerable organizational talents to help make our meetings run smoothly.

Others who provided useful information and wise advice include Cecelia Burke, director of the Travis County Domestic Relations Office; Ellen Richards, planner in Travis County Health and Human Services and Veterans Services; and Ann Costilow, formerly of the Office of the Attorney General.

In Columbus, we'd like to thank Russell and Barbara Miller of the Ohio Children's Foundation for their confidence, and Peggy Calestro of the foundation for her continued support and enthusiasm.

In Minneapolis and across the state of Minnesota, fatherhood efforts could not have reached their current level of development without the long-term support and interest of the McKnight Foundation and program officer Louis Hohlfeld. The foundation supported the work of this project in numerous ways, including financially. We acknowledge the foundation's good efforts on behalf of strong families through promoting father involvement. We also express thanks to loyal NPNFF members Kenneth Macon and Patrick Morley for their assistance in arranging the focus groups with fathers and practitioners.

In Philadelphia, the William Penn Foundation provided both financial support and the use of their conference room for both the pre-study meeting and the feedback forums. Our thanks are extended to President Ronnie Bloom and Program Officer Margo Campbell for their interest and assistance. As always, Dr. Vivian Gadsden at the National Center on Fathers and Families graciously offered her assistance to NPNFF's efforts, for which we are most grateful.

At SPAN, policy associates Jacqueline Greer, Jessica Hase Kleinmann, and Jonathan O'Connell made many valuable research contributions to the project, as did interns Joshua Losben and Jeffrey Vigliotti.

At NPNFF, Neil Tift, Daniel Andrews, and John A. Smith contributed to the work on this project. As always, the NPNFF board of directors provided sanction and guidance to this project, and its individual members offered helpful advice and assistance to the work, especially Greg Patton, Sr. in Philadelphia, and Dwaine Simms and Bryan Nelson in Minneapolis.

Our colleague and consultant, Dr. John Wilson, Sr., provided invaluable assistance in preparing the reports for both the Minneapolis and Philadelphia studies. Betty Jones, executive assistant, as usual did yeoman's work to help us meet our printing deadlines for the report feedback forums.

Thanks also to Jonathan Tunik and Sandra Hamm of Metis Associates, who designed the data-gathering process and analyzed the results.

Finally, and most importantly, we'd like to thank the fathers, practitioners, and caseworkers all of which generously shared their time and insights with us.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

BY ALMOST EVERY MEASURE OF PUBLIC OPINION, AMERICANS SUPPORT helping children get a good start in life. Consequently, policymakers and researchers constantly look for ideas to help children.

One of the most promising strategies for helping children is helping their fathers stay involved in their lives. Research clearly demonstrates that father involvement benefits children in many ways. When fathers actively engage in their children's lives, children do better developmentally, socially, and financially. Furthermore, when fathers are involved, they are more likely to pay child support.

But all too often, particularly when the relationships between mothers and fathers fall apart, fathers fail to spend time with their children or support them financially.

In recent years, federal and state policies have focused on increasing fathers' financial contributions through tougher child support enforcement. New uniform interstate child support laws and tougher penalties for parents who don't meet child support obligations have increased child support collections.

While these new policies have helped many families, they do not go far enough in promoting responsible fatherhood because they fail on two accounts: addressing the root causes of fathers' nonsupport and helping fathers learn the skills they need to be good parents.

To more fully document the experiences of low-income, noncustodial fathers and to identify policy and practice changes that might help fathers build better connections to the workplace and to their families, the Social Policy Action Network (SPAN) and the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (NPNFF) interviewed fathers and the front-line workers who try to help them. The research was conducted in four cities: Austin; Columbus, Ohio; Minneapolis; and Philadelphia in early 2002.

The goal of the project was to identify the challenges facing low-income fathers seeking to support their children and to identify challenges facing public and private agencies working to help fathers reach that goal.

Much of what we learned echoed the findings of large national research efforts.

As the Urban Institute's research has documented, the needs of low-income, noncustodial fathers are similar to those of their female partners. They have low educational attainment and long histories of unemployment or underemployment. Many also have criminal backgrounds and substance abuse problems.

Research from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is showing that when young, low-income, unmarried couples have children, both fathers and mothers have high hopes that fathers will stay involved and support their children.

Work by the Center for Law and Social Policy has demonstrated that many features of the child support system—such as the lack of pass-throughs in many states and policies that allow arrearages and interest to accumulate to very high levels—can discourage fathers from trying to make child support payments and alienate them from their families.

And as research from the National Center for Children in Poverty's *Map & Track* report has shown, few states aggressively target welfare and workforce dollars to programs designed for fathers.

But our research in the four cities identified other obstacles that will be difficult to address through policy reform alone. Chief among the obstacles are these:

First, fathers don't trust service providers. Fathers assume that caseworkers are aligned with mothers and will do little to help them, even when they seek needed services. In all four cities, practitioners and fathers reported that the fathers don't use services because they are uncomfortable with—even fearful of—the system. Few programs make concrete efforts to address these barriers.

Second, in all four cities, fathers and their advocates reported that many caseworkers are neither trained—nor inclined—to work with fathers. While generally agreeing with the idea that fathers need services, many caseworkers did not consider recruiting or educating fathers about existing services to be part of their job.

Third, private-sector employers were reluctant to hire low-income men—preferring to hire women and part-time teenagers. We heard reports about how some employers actively screen out these men through credit checks, criminal background checks, literacy requirements, and the General Educational Development (GED) test. Practitioners said employers use these screens to deny men jobs regardless of whether the tests relate to the jobs' requirements.

Recommendations

Congress should:

- Establish a block grant to states to provide employment, training, job retention, and support services to unemployed and low-income fathers. The services and supports provided should be analogous to employment services available to and supportive of mothers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), but specifically targeted to fathers.

- Allow states to include the work of low-income fathers whose children are receiving TANF toward their TANF work participation goals. This would provide states an incentive to extend employment services to more low-income fathers.

- Require states to pass through at least $50 of child support to welfare families and resume the federal policy of sharing the cost of the pass-through with the states.

State legislatures should:

- Address the causes of nonsupport. States should devote more money to preparing fathers for work. States recognize the numerous services mothers need to get jobs: child care, education, transportation assistance, and life-skills training. State legislators have not committed enough money to supporting fathers with similar needs who want to work.

- Develop programs that create early opportunities for fathers to connect with their children. Hospitals and prenatal clinics could employ father-outreach workers who would teach fathers about child development and the value of paternal involvement. New fathers could benefit from meeting other fathers with similar concerns and parenting goals.

- Reduce or suspend child support payments for fathers who are actively trying to increase their future job opportunities by engaging in certain activities: finishing high school, attending job training, or undergoing substance abuse rehabilitation. Currently, when fathers participate in these programs, their child support debt mounts, providing a disincentive to get the help that they need.

- Require the local offices, which administer federally funded Workforce Investment Act programs, to report on the number of low-income, noncustodial parents that they serve. Programs should also be required to report on job placement and retention rates.

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- Adopt or expand child support pass-throughs. Passing along just $50 provides fathers with an incentive to pay child support and allows mothers and children to benefit directly from fathers' contributions.

State-run and nonprofit programs should:

- Target low-income fathers at greatest risk of falling behind on child support orders and connect them to education, training, and jobs. One way to do this is by identifying noncustodial parents with child support arrears and recruiting them to participate in education and training programs.

- Provide legal services to fathers. Fathers need legal representation in navigating the child support system and in seeking and enforcing visitation rights. Fathers want to spend time with their children and have the right to see them. And fathers who are concerned and connected with their children are more likely to meet child support obligations.

- Increase fathers' awareness of services and actively recruit them. Many caseworkers suggested that the problem is not always a lack of services for fathers, but often fathers' lack of knowledge about services.

- Provide life-skills classes to low-income, noncustodial fathers. Like low-income mothers, fathers need basic knowledge about such topics as budgeting and workplace etiquette.

- Provide more opportunities for fathers to interact with their children. Playgroups and outings that are father-child specific can teach fathers how to improve their relationships with their children.

- Shift social services agencies' focus to redefine the family unit as one that includes fathers as well as mothers and children. Fathers often report that they feel agencies are hostile towards them as noncustodial parents.

- Create services specifically targeted to fathers. Fathers are often reluctant to use services that they believe are designed for mothers only and are staffed primarily by women.

- Hire more male caseworkers. Fathers say that they would be more inclined to get services if more caseworkers were male and from their own communities.

Expanding the Goals of "Responsible Fatherhood" Policy

Voices from the Field in Four Cities

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, increasing numbers of U.S. children have been growing up fatherless. Indeed, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that of the 11.9 million families headed by single parents, more than 82 percent of those parents are mothers.[1] And when children are fatherless, they are more likely to grow up poor. Thus, federal policy initiatives have largely focused on compelling absent fathers to pay child support.

The policies, which include uniform interstate child support laws, registries of newly hired employees to determine delinquency in child support payments, and tougher penalties for parents who don't meet child support obligations, have helped increase the incomes of many families. Indeed, child support collection grew by almost 49 percent, from $12 billion in 1996 to $17.8 billion in 2000.[2]

But compelling absent fathers who have financial resources to pay child support is only the first step of the responsible fatherhood agenda. Now policymakers must recognize that there are two more steps necessary to complete the mission of promoting responsible fatherhood.

First, policymakers must adopt strategies to help fathers who are uneducated, unemployed, or underemployed join the workforce. Why? The average woman leaving welfare is struggling to support her children with a job that pays less than $7 an hour; welfare reform has yet to make most poor mothers financially self-sufficient. Yet the fathers of their children are, in many cases, the fathers who still do not pay child support. Indeed, the Urban Institute reports that in 1997, about 90 percent of the 2.8 million poor nonresidential fathers failed to pay child support.[3]

Helping low-income, noncustodial fathers get jobs would be worth the investment. While these men have long been stereotyped as "deadbeats," seeking to avoid responsibility for their children, research now shows that many of these fathers have strong desires to support and help raise their children. Thus policymakers should enact policies that address the reasons—such as lack of education and work experience—that fathers can't pay child support.

While these men have long been stereotyped as "deadbeats..." research now shows that many of these fathers have strong desires to support and help raise their children.

Second, policymakers must support new policies to foster and sustain fathers' emotional support for their children. Research contradicts a common perception about low-income, noncustodial fathers and their children—that fathers' most significant contribution to their children's well-being is financial.

Research now shows that, regardless of whether they pay child support, fathers' presence in the lives of their children has positive effects. Thus policymakers should support programs that help fathers learn to be good parents and strengthen relationships between fathers and mothers. Increasing fathers' involvement not only benefits their children's emotional development, but also increases the likelihood that fathers will pay child support.

To more fully document the experiences of low-income, noncustodial fathers, the Social Policy Action Network (SPAN) and the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families (NPNFF) conducted interviews in four cities: Austin; Columbus, Ohio; Minneapolis; and Philadelphia. The interviews took place in February and March 2002.

The goal of the project was two-fold: 1) to identify the challenges facing low-income fathers seeking to support their children, and 2) to identify challenges facing public and private agencies working to help fathers reach that goal.

Fathers frequently face more profound barriers to work than mothers, such as a greater likelihood of incarceration, drug addiction, or homelessness.

In each city, our research included two focus group interviews: one with low-income, noncustodial fathers and another with the practitioners who work with low-income fathers. In addition, we interviewed caseworkers in agencies serving low-income families to determine the degree to which they work with noncustodial fathers. The agencies represent such service categories as early childhood education (Head Start), social services, housing assistance, welfare, and workforce development.

The first lesson that we learned from interviews and focus groups in the four cities is that the needs of low-income fathers parallel—and might even exceed—the needs of low-income mothers. The nation's 1996 landmark welfare reform law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), was based on the premise that welfare mothers could achieve financial independence if given the proper tools. During the debates that preceded the reform, policymakers came to understand that if welfare mothers are to succeed, they need more than access to jobs.

To become self-sufficient, welfare mothers also need help with child care, health care, and transportation. Some need life-skills training, some need basic education, and some need parenting classes. And even when they find jobs, many welfare mothers still need an array of child care, health care, and income supports such as the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Low-income fathers need many of these same supports—yet they receive much less help. In fact, fathers frequently face more profound barriers to work than mothers, such as a greater likelihood of incarceration, drug addiction, or homelessness.

The second lesson from our research strongly reinforced what many analysts have already observed about welfare and workforce policies—that they provide little incentive for states and communities to work with fathers.

Congress will have opportunities to address these policy shortcomings when it reauthorizes the Workforce Investment Act in 2003 as well as when it reauthorizes PRWORA. Whether or not Congress makes significant changes to these laws, states still have the flexibility to serve fathers through these programs. Specific recommendations for how states can serve fathers are found in the SPAN publication released in September 2000, *Restoring Fathers to Families and Communities: Six Steps for Policymakers*.

But our research in the four cities identified three other obstacles that will be difficult to address through policy reform alone.

First, fathers don't trust service providers and expect negative consequences, such as being reported to child support enforcement authorities, when they seek needed services. In all four cities, practitioners and fathers reported that the fathers don't use services because they are uncomfortable—even fearful of—the system.

Second, in all four cities, fathers and their advocates reported many caseworkers are neither trained—nor inclined—to work with fathers. While generally agreeing with the idea that fathers need services, many caseworkers did not view it as their job to recruit or educate fathers about existing services.

By far the most troubling finding was that in all four cities, private-sector employers were reluctant to hire low-income men. We heard reports about how some employers actively screen out these men through credit checks, criminal background checks, literacy requirements, and the tougher new General Educational Development (GED) test. Caseworkers said employers use these screens to deny men jobs regardless of whether they relate to the jobs' requirements.

Low-Income, Unmarried Families—The Status of Fathers and Mothers

By almost all measures—employment, education, health, and rates of incarceration and substance abuse—low-income, noncustodial fathers struggle to keep their lives together.

In 1999, the education levels of low-income parents were similar. Among low-income fathers, only 60 percent had finished high school. Low-income mothers' had similarly low education levels; only 62 percent finished high school. In the same report from the Urban Institute, we learned that 41 percent of low-income fathers and 35 percent of low-income mothers had not been employed for one year or more.[4] And when these parents did work, they earned little.

Fathers worked more hours per week; mothers worked more weeks per year—balancing out their estimated annual earnings at $5,627 for poor fathers and $5,276 for poor mothers.[5]

In terms of health status, fathers fared worse than mothers. According to an Urban Institute study, *Helping Poor Nonresident Dads Do More*, 25 percent of low-income, nonresident fathers reported having at least one health barrier to work; for low-income, custodial mothers, 21 percent reported such barriers. More than 50 percent of low-income, noncustodial fathers were uninsured in 1999. While Medicaid covered only 15 percent of fathers, Medicaid covered almost 50 percent of mothers.[6]

Furthermore, many of these fathers are in prison. According to Urban Institute researchers Elaine Sorensen and Chava Zibman, 29 percent of low-income, nonresident fathers not paying child support were institutionalized in 1997.[7] The federal Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that in 1999, an estimated 721,500 of the 1.28 million state and federal prisoners were parents of minor children. Of these parents, 92.5 percent were fathers.[8]

The Benefits of Father Involvement

It has long been documented that fatherless children are more likely to grow up poor. While the poverty rate for children in two-parent families is 8 percent, the rate for children in divorced families is 31 percent. For children whose parents never married, the poverty rate is 64 percent.[9] The median family income of married-couple families was $56,676 in 1999. In that same year, the median family income for single-mother families was $23,792.[10]

Fathers' financial contributions reduce poverty and increase the chances that the fathers will spend time with their children. In a study conducted by the Urban Institute, researchers found that noncustodial fathers are more likely to see their children if they pay child support. Even when fathers don't make payments, they are still more likely to see their children if support orders are

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established. This is especially true in instances in which the children are born out of wedlock.[11]

Regardless of whether fathers pay child support, fathers' presence can have positive effects on children. As they grow, children with fathers or close relationships with adult males have higher self-esteem, are better learners, and are less likely to be depressed.[12] Children whose fathers share meals, spend leisure time with them, or help with homework do significantly better in school than those children whose fathers do not.[13]

Child support payments provide additional benefits for children. For example, older children who receive child support payment from noncustodial parents are more likely to succeed academically, finish high school, and attend college than children who don't.[14]

In recent years, research also has established that fathers have a distinctive way of communicating and playing with their children. "Fathering" is a parenting style distinctive from "mothering." Thus fathers add an important dimension to children's intellectual and social development.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a five-year research project interviewing mothers and fathers from the time of the child's birth to age 4. The study, funded by the federal government and foundations, is based on data collected in 20 U.S. cities with populations exceeding 200,000 between February 1998 and September 2000.

Fragile Families researchers found that when unmarried mothers received financial support from their babies' fathers, children were less likely to be born of low-birthweight—a risk for delayed development and other problems later in life.[15]

Father absence hurts children too. Children raised without fathers at home are more likely to perform poorly in school;[16] develop emotional problems; engage in risky behaviors such as early sexual activity and drug and alcohol abuse;[17] and experience violence.[18] In addition, fatherless boys are more likely to become violent men than boys raised with fathers in the home.[19]

Yet despite this substantial research supporting the benefits to father involvement, policy efforts aimed at low-income fathers are largely focused on child support collection.

How Low-Income Fathers Feel About Their Children

In general, policymakers have made decisions affecting low-income, unmarried fathers based on the assumption that fathers want to avoid their parental responsibilities. But striking new research from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is proving that assumption to be inaccurate.

In a Fragile Families Study research brief released in January 2001, researchers found that fathers have high hopes for involvement with their children and that both parents have similarly high hopes for their relationships. Interview results showed 92 percent of fathers who were living with mothers,

"I felt scared," explained one father, "because I knew I had to grow up and start being responsible."

but not married to them, were present when their children were born. This is very similar to the percentage of married fathers present at the hospital: 95 percent. Among fathers romantically involved, but not living with the mothers, 72 percent were present when their children were born.[20]

When asked about the births of their children, focus group participants expressed pride, love, and an understanding of the responsibility associated with becoming a parent.

In addition, the Fragile Families Study reported that almost 75 percent of mothers interviewed believed that their chances of marrying the fathers of their children were 50 percent or better; 79 percent planned to give children their fathers' surnames; and 84 percent of mothers planned to put fathers' names on birth certificates. Perhaps most significant was the finding that 99 percent of fathers in the study expressed a desire to be involved in raising their children.[21]

According to fathers, caseworkers, and practitioners participating in our study, these patterns hold true for low-income, noncustodial fathers in all four cities. When asked about the births of their children, focus group participants expressed pride, love, and an understanding of the responsibility associated with becoming a parent.

One father in Minneapolis explained, "I felt proud having children, a legacy to leave behind." In Austin, one father spoke of his feelings when "looking back at someone who looks like me" and yet another, also in Austin, spoke about "holding another human being that I made."

In addition to pride, fathers in all four cities expressed the profound love they feel for their children. Several fathers described holding their children as one of the best feelings they ever had. One Austin father spoke of his sense of "being blessed." Another father said of his daughter, "I love her to death."

In addition to their pride and love, many fathers also understood that commitments and sacrifices are required of good parents. Fathers in Minneapolis expressed their fears of adequately fulfilling their responsibilities. "I felt scared," explained one father, "because I knew I had to grow up and start being responsible." Another participant repeated that phrase: "I felt scared, knowing I had to be responsible, that I can't be running the streets."

Fathers in all four cities spoke of the profound love they feel for their children.

Fathers' comments suggested that they were eager to be involved fathers even when aware of the personal issues that could impede them. "I knew I wasn't ready. I was wild and irresponsible. . . I was scared, but happy she was here. I didn't hold her until she was one month old. . . I was afraid to squish her."

For some, fatherhood motivated them to make healthy changes in their lifestyles, "[It] slowed me down from doing a whole lot of running around like I was doing, and it's the best thing that ever happened to me." For this father, his child's birth provided the motivation to make positive changes in his life. In all four cities, caseworkers' and practitioners' repeated what fathers said—that fathers were overwhelmingly excited about the births of their children and eager to be good fathers, partners, and providers.

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Fathers Know They Are Important to Children

The fathers in our focus groups clearly understood the value of their commitment to their children. When discussing what children need most, fathers in all four cities spoke of their children's need for love and affection. They defined this as their greatest value to their children.

Fathers in Austin identified affection, understanding, and opportunities to bond with parents in a stable environment as their children's primary needs. Columbus fathers echoed these ideas, saying that children need a great deal of attention and human contact. In Minneapolis, a recurring theme emerged: Being a good father is not about what one has, but who one is, which means being a good role model and spending quality time with your child.

One father in Philadelphia said that children need guidance and constant adult involvement in learning right from wrong, showing affection to family members, going to work or to school, reading the Bible, and even wearing seatbelts.

Fathers did not explicitly mention their experiences with drug and alcohol abuse or crime during these conversations. But many acknowledged having "made some mistakes." As several fathers in Philadelphia noted, children must understand that they have choices in life and that these choices have consequences.

Fathers in three out of four cities asserted that they were better prepared than mothers to educate their sons on physical development and dating and to also educate their daughters on male behavior and dating. Several fathers also mentioned the importance of father involvement when disciplining children. Furthermore, having grown up without fathers themselves, these men understood the profound effect of father absence.

Why Fathers Don't Follow Through on Good Intentions

Recent research by Fragile Families indicates that by the time the children in the study are 18 months old, 26 percent of their parents no longer live together.[22] The couples in the study face financial stresses that increase with the addition of a child. Without supports to help these young families stay together, couples grow apart, fathers move out, and fathers' bonds with their children deteriorate. In fact, the 1993 book, *Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Roles and Emerging Policies*, noted that by the time children with never-married parents reach age 7, only 25 percent see their fathers at least once a week.[23]

The fathers in our study showed similar good intentions and similar difficulties following through on those intentions. Fathers in all four cities acknowledged that they do not spend as much time with their children as they would like to, for a variety of reasons: lack of money; poor relationships with mothers and their families; incarceration and substance abuse; and their own lack of involved fathers.

Practitioners explained that grandparents, particularly grandmothers, are frequently angry with the unmarried fathers of their grandchildren and insist that fathers not be involved.

Practitioners and fathers explained that fathers often believe that if they don't have money to pay for entertainment, their children won't be interested in seeing them. Fathers' ability to provide for their children financially is widely accepted to be a key predictor of their involvement, as explained by Sara McLanahan and Marcia J. Carlson in their working paper *Fragile Families, Father Involvement, and Public Policy*.[24]

When fathers spend long periods away from their children, their relationships are difficult to renew.

We also learned that in many cases, mothers deny fathers access to their children. Because mothers are generally the custodial parents, they make the rules about when, where, and whether fathers get to see their children.

In Austin and Philadelphia, fathers identified poor relationships with the mothers of their children as the biggest barriers to spending time with their children. According to both fathers and practitioners in our study, mothers frequently deny visits to fathers who fall behind on child support. Fathers and practitioners said that mothers are oftentimes unhappy when fathers begin new relationships and don't want their children spending time with fathers' new girlfriends. As a result, mothers make visits more difficult.

Caseworkers lamented that mothers don't understand that denying visitation for late child support is detrimental to children, who feel abandoned by their fathers.

Maternal families present obstacles as well. When mothers live with their own parents, their parents' disapproval can be a particularly powerful obstacle to fathers' relationships with their children. In Philadelphia, practitioners explained that grandparents, particularly grandmothers, are frequently angry with the unmarried fathers of their grandchildren and insist that fathers not be involved.

The culture of family-serving organizations must be changed so that the definition of "family" includes fathers.

Practitioners also attributed fathers' decreasing involvement with their children to time spent in jail and drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs. When fathers spend long periods away from their children, their relationships are difficult to renew.

Finally, practitioners explained that fathers' commitment to being involved parents might be diminished due to lack of role models. The problem of a lack of role models was more pervasive in African-American families, explained practitioners in Columbus, where only 28 percent of African-American children are raised in two-parent homes, compared to 70 percent of white children.

Reversing the Pattern—What It Would Take

Overall, what we learned from the four cities pointed to three areas for reform. First, the workforce system must be changed to meet the particular needs of fathers. Next, the child support system must be changed to reflect the reality of fathers' economic circumstances. And finally, the culture of family-serving organizations must be changed so that the definition of "family"

includes fathers, that supports offered to fathers are appropriate, and that the professionals who work with fathers understand their needs.

Putting Fathers to Work

Fathers clearly need education and training, but without available jobs in their communities or reliable transportation, even fathers with skills find it difficult to get jobs. In addition, poor health and incarceration are common barriers for these fathers.

Fathers Need Skill-Based Job Training

Recent national studies have established that, like low-income mothers, low-income fathers lack the education and training they need to get and keep good jobs. Public policy has long recognized that in addition to education and job training, mothers need an array of services, including life-skills classes, child care, and housing assistance to help them become self-sufficient. But policymakers have yet to make similar services available to fathers.

According to a report by the Urban Institute, low-income, nonresident fathers are less prepared than mothers to enter the labor market. In 1999, 40 percent of poor, nonresident fathers and 38 percent of poor, custodial mothers had never finished high school. Furthermore, over 41 percent of low-income, noncustodial fathers and 35 percent of poor mothers had been unemployed for at least one year.[25]

Yet fathers have far fewer training program opportunities. An Urban Institute report, *Helping Poor Nonresident Dads Do More*, showed that in 1999, 20 percent of mothers reported receiving job search assistance compared to 6 percent of fathers.[26] A 2001 Urban Institute report found that the rate for mothers' participation in training and education classes was 19 percent in 1996 compared to just 4 percent for low-income, noncustodial fathers.[27]

Fathers Need Jobs They Can Get To

Many low-income people live in urban or rural settings while available jobs are located in the suburbs, making it difficult for people who lack transportation to reach these jobs. In addition, many entry-level jobs require evening and weekend work—times when public transportation is even more difficult to use.[28]

In William Julius Wilson's book, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, researchers found that only 28 percent of unemployed people had access to cars. In ghetto neighborhoods—defined as census tracts where 40 percent or more of the household members live on incomes at or below the federal poverty line—just 18 percent of unemployed people had access to cars.[29]

One of the main barriers is transportation. There are jobs, but they are not local.

A caseworker in Minneapolis listed transportation as one of the top three obstacles for men seeking employment. Another caseworker, also in Minneapolis said, "Transportation is the difference between making it and not." According to a third caseworker, "One of the main barriers to moving forward is transportation. There are jobs, but they are not local."

Practitioners and caseworkers in Philadelphia, where public transportation is available, said that fathers in that city need stipends to help them get to and from their jobs. "The lack of transportation stipends is the biggest concern, and clothing, housing, and food supports are occasionally requested as well," said one practitioner.

Another said, "Fathers don't have transportation or tokens to get here and there with their children or to get to a job-training program or to the right agencies." He continued, "I have heard about people needing to choose between buying groceries and tokens." As a result, the practitioner said his agency provides tokens for fathers, but there are some fathers for whom this isn't enough, and they still need additional help.

Fathers Need Employers Who Will Hire Them

Research by Harry Holzer and Paul Offner of the Urban Institute highlights very disturbing trends in the employment patterns of young, less-educated, African-American men. In 2000, only 52 percent of these men were employed—down from 62 percent 20 years ago. It is worth noting that a disproportionate number of low-income, noncustodial fathers are African-American.

By contrast, employment rates for white and Hispanic men of the same educational backgrounds hover around 80 percent. While African-American males' employment rates were decreasing, employment for African-American women of the same age and educational levels were increasing. From 1990 to 2000, employment for young African-American females increased from 37 percent to 52 percent. The researchers said the trend cannot be explained by labor market changes or education levels.[30]

Practitioners in Columbus noted that giving state and federal tax credits to employers for hiring individuals with barriers to employment does not ensure that employers actually change hiring processes. In fact, one study participant explained that employers often collect applications at job fairs and use them as proof of good-faith efforts to hire applicants with barriers to employment without following through on the applications.

Practitioners and caseworkers in all four cities agreed that private-sector employees are reluctant to hire low-income fathers. In fact, when caseworkers were asked what they would most like to provide to fathers, caseworkers listed "private-sector employment opportunities" along with education and training as the most important needs. According to practitioners, employers find ways not to hire low-income men. In Columbus, practitioners attributed private-sector employers' reluctance to hire low-income fathers to racism and employers' assumptions that low-income fathers are largely African-American.

Practitioners also talked about employment screens. Employers often use credit checks even when jobs don't require handling money. Another example is the use of criminal background checks to disqualify applicants, even when their crimes are nonviolent. Employers may also use literacy requirements, even for positions that don't require reading. And, according to practitioners, the newest barrier is the tougher new General Educational Development (GED) test; many employers require GEDs, and many men can't pass them now that they are more difficult.

New child support collection strategies, which include reporting child support arrearages to credit rating services and significant criminal penalties including jail time, further complicate job prospects because they show up during the screens. Child support agencies require employers to create a mechanism for collecting child support from their employees. This creates a disincentive for businesses, especially small ones, to hire parents with outstanding child support arrears.

Although they share similar problems as women, these fathers often don't have a system of friends, professionals, and organizations to support them.

One obstacle to employment that isn't new, but has grown tremendously, is the incarceration rate of low-income men. Having served their time, fathers seeking fresh starts and new jobs are still burdened with their criminal records, and employers are reluctant to hire them. Caseworkers reported that many employers refuse to hire ex-convicts, even if their crimes were non-violent and non-threatening, such as failing to pay their child support.

Practitioners in Columbus reported that criminal background checks for new hires are a common practice. Offner and Holzer reported that crime rates for young African-American men have dropped while incarceration rates have increased. [31] The number of adult males in the correctional population increased by two-thirds from 1986–97.[32]

During this same period, according to an article in *The Economist* on August 10, 2002, prisons have cut rehabilitation programs such as job training and treatment for substance abuse.[33] As a result, more people struggle to stay out of prison or overcome the stigma of their criminal records when looking for a job once released.

An article in the same issue of *The Economist* noted, "a survey of employers in five large cities found that 65 percent would not knowingly hire an ex-convict." The article went on to explain that depending on state laws, it might even be illegal for employers to hire ex-convicts for some jobs, such as barbering.[34]

Practitioners and caseworkers in all four cities agreed that private-sector employees are reluctant to hire low-income fathers.

Fathers Need Health Care

Given that 39 percent of fathers reported at least one health problem that presented a barrier to work, access to health care is critical.[35] Yet all too often, poor men, especially minorities, lack health insurance coverage.

In *A Poor Man's Plight: Uncovering the Disparity in Men's Health*, the Kellogg Foundation reported that among African-American men ages 18–64, 28 percent were uninsured. Among Hispanic men, 46 percent lacked

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health insurance, whereas only 17 percent of non-Hispanic white men were uninsured.[36]

Furthermore, the report's authors, John Rich and Marguerite Ro, found that even when men of color have insurance coverage comparable to whites, they have greater difficulty getting medical appointments and wait longer when they arrive for their appointments.

According to the 2000 Household Survey on Drug Abuse by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), men are more likely than women to drink excessively and use illicit drugs. Twenty-one percent of men ages 12 to 20 and 15.9 percent of their female peers reported binge drinking in 2000. The percent of men abusing illicit drugs was 7.7 percent, compared to 5 percent of women. Yet according to the practitioners and caseworkers interviewed for our study, rehabilitation placements for women are far easier to find than for men.

Low-income men with mental illness are among the least likely to receive appropriate treatment. In general, the public understands much less about mental illness than physical illness, which is easier to recognize and diagnose. According to the Kellogg report, acknowledging mental illness or emotional distress proves especially difficult for minority men, who perceive such difficulties as "not acting as a man." Even when men recognize and seek help for mental illness, a lack of insurance is likely to limit their ability to get needed services.

Although they share similar problems with women, these fathers often don't have systems of friends, professionals, and organizations to support them. Consequently, the fathers are often unable to cope with their emotional problems and mental illnesses, and they "reach for drugs or alcohol to deal with the pain."

Fathers Need Help Dealing With Barriers to Employment

Ex-offenders need help overcoming the stigma of having criminal records. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) released a report called *Every Door Closed: Barriers Facing Parents with Criminal Records*. In this report, CLASP recommended ways to improve employment prospects for ex-offender parents. Among those recommendations were improving bonding and tax-credit programs and offering certificates of rehabilitation to encourage employers to hire ex-offenders.[37] According to a focus group of practitioners in Columbus, however, these strategies are not sufficient to induce employers to hire ex-offenders.

Alternatively, efforts to expunge offenses, seal records, and revise pardon standards and procedures might be more effective at removing obstacles to employers hiring ex-offenders.

Reforming the Child Support System

Children need the financial support of their fathers. Unfortunately, not all fathers assume financial responsibility for supporting their children.

Simply put, the child support system—as it now operates—reduces father involvement. According to fathers and practitioners in all four cities, the courts that determine child support orders and the child support system, actually introduce or increase tensions between parents. These interactions frequently lead to mothers preventing fathers from seeing their children.

First and foremost, state guidelines frequently set unrealistically high child support orders for fathers who work part time for low wages. In Minneapolis, fathers noted that they had a difficult time keeping up with high child support payments. They described a system that does not allow fathers to adequately update their child support order when their circumstances have changed.

When orders must be established, reconsidered, or altered, judges often make the decisions. And almost without exception, fathers found that the courts were unfair, punitive, and disinclined to believe that low-income fathers can improve their ways. Consequently, fathers tried to avoid interactions with the courts or any agencies they perceived as linked with the courts.

While state law enforces child support obligations, no parallel law facilitates the enforcement of visitation agreements.

Second, it is reasonable to assume that new strategies for collecting these orders, such as income withholding and the Financial Institution Data Match, prove more successful for non-poor, noncustodial fathers with steady incomes. While these improvements have demonstrated significant increases in child support collection for some fathers, it is now time to turn the focus of reform to fathers who don't have incomes to withhold or the bank accounts to match.

Third, current child support collection policies deny fathers the satisfaction that comes from seeing their money directly benefit their children. Some states provide child support pass-throughs, but state child support systems rarely consider the non-financial contributions that noncustodial fathers make to their children's lives. As a result, legal systems often harm emotional ties between fathers and their children in their aggressive pursuit of child support payments.

Finally, when legal negotiations become divisive for couples, mothers become obstacles for noncustodial fathers who want to engage in their children's lives. Even when legal visitation orders exist, mothers have nearly total control over fathers' visitation. Austin fathers were particularly outspoken about their difficulties seeing their children. In Columbus, practitioners said that the courts enforce child support, but not visitation agreements. As a result, noncustodial fathers end up feeling cheated when the system makes them pay but doesn't help them see their children.

Setting and Maintaining Order Amounts

CURRENT POLICIES

A set of state policies affects the way child support obligations are determined and maintained. For instance, states must decide whether to pass through any portion of child support payments owed to the state to families, how orders may be modified when circumstances change for noncustodial parents, and whether to charge interest on late payments and arrears. States use one of several federally approved formulas to determine initial child support orders

The most commonly used system, the "income shares" model, creates obligation amounts that match what parents with similar incomes would spend on their children in intact families. Under this model, noncustodial parents with lower incomes generally pay a higher percentage of their salaries than those with higher incomes.

The oldest and simplest child support formula uses a percentage of all noncustodial parents' incomes. In some states, the percentage is flat; in others it varies with income. Thirteen states use this model. Most assume that noncustodial parents will make financial commitments equal to that of custodial parents.

State guidelines frequently set unrealistically high child support orders for fathers who work part time for low wages.

The so-called Melson model sets aside a portion of each parent's income for self-support needs and then calculates how much each would contribute if they were in intact households, much the way the income shares model does.

Child support laws in Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas vary considerably. Minnesota bases child support obligations on a flat percentage of the net income of noncustodial parents. They pay 25 percent of their net income for one child, 30 percent for two children, and 35 percent for three children. The percentage is lower for obligors with net incomes below $1,000 per month. For instance, the state requires noncustodial parents earning between $551–$600 per month with two children to pay 19 percent of their income. The amount of child support paid by a parent with less than $550 in monthly income is left to the discretion of the court.

Minnesota charges interest on both late payments and on arrears and only allows modifications in cases in which noncustodial parents show that their obligation amounts would be lowered by at least 20 percent or $50 per payment.

In comparison to Minnesota, most low-income, noncustodial parents in Ohio and Pennsylvania initially stand to pay significantly higher support amounts. Ohio uses the income shares model and also provides significant exceptions for noncustodial parents who have very low incomes, making for fairly modest obligation amounts. In general, low-income, noncustodial parents pay a higher percentage of their salaries in child support than higher earners.

But those with little or no earnings owe very small percentages: Non-custodial parents who earn less than $860 per month owe only 8 percent of their income for any number of children. Ohio has not updated its estimates of family expenditures on children in nearly a decade, so noncustodial parents in

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Ohio face obligations that are based on 1992 price levels, which lowers support amounts.

Ohio charges interest on late payments, but not on arrears. The state allows noncustodial parents to modify their orders if changes in circumstances result in at least a 10 percent difference in obligation. This is slightly lower than the average requirement for modification; in many states, noncustodial parents must show that changing circumstances have caused a 20–25 percent change in their obligation.

Pennsylvania also uses the income shares model, but obligation amounts are consistently higher than in Ohio, and noncustodial parents in Pennsylvania owe more child support at every income level than those in Ohio. The discrepancy is most pronounced among noncustodial parents who earn less than $1,000 per month: A noncustodial parent in Pennsylvania with a monthly net income of $850 and two children might pay 36 percent of his income to child support, while he would pay 28–33 percent of his income in Ohio.

Pennsylvania does not seek interest on late payments or on arrears. However, to have their obligations amount modified, noncustodial parents must show in court that they have undergone a "material and substantial change in circumstances."

Like Minnesota, Texas bases obligations on a flat percentage rate, but includes a parent's other financial resources in determining obligation amounts, which increases orders. Still, the percentages Texas uses to calculate obligations are lower than in Minnesota: Noncustodial parents pay 20 percent of their net resources for one child, 25 percent for two children, and 30 percent for three children, with exceptions for noncustodial parents who have obligations to more than one family.

Texas charges interest on both late payments and on arrears and allows modifications only to noncustodial parents whose changes in circumstances result in a 20 percent or $100 difference in their payments—an onerous standard.

EFFECT ON FATHERS

Practitioners generally felt that most men do not understand how the child support system works; one practitioner in Columbus said this was particularly true among African-American men. Furthermore, men often hesitate to file for child support modifications in court because they hear horror stories about fathers being treated unfairly and assume that they will receive similar treatment. "Rumors go around the community about fathers' negative experiences with these types of programs, so people don't trust them," said one Columbus practitioner.

Minneapolis fathers explained that courts rarely give them credit for efforts to improve themselves and their situations. Even when fathers make significant efforts to change their lives, such as attending school or self-improvement programs, the court holds past unemployment and histories of drug abuse against them. Fathers who were behind in child support said that courts

repeatedly forced them to "prove yourself to the court—even if you have proven yourself to yourself and others around you."

One father in the Minneapolis focus group put it succinctly, "We're all human. Because we made mistakes in life, it shouldn't stop us from making progress."

As a father from the same focus group said, "If I just got out of prison and I'm constantly being denied a job, an apartment, how am I supposed to support my family? Everything is being held against us right now."

As a result, many fathers avoid the court system altogether by attempting to manage their child support obligations informally. One Philadelphia father persuaded the mother of his children not to seek a modification in his child support order based on the difference in their salaries. He showed her that she made much more money than he did and that additional payments would create an unreasonable hardship for him. The mother agreed to the arrangement despite pressure from her girlfriends, who urged her to seek a modification in support.

Such informal courtroom decisions are not uncommon. Another father, after having his order reduced by a court, continued to pay the higher amount he was previously paying in order to avoid a conflict with his children's mother. Although the father could have legally paid the lower amount, his decision to make a higher financial commitment reduced the potential for disagreements with his children's mother and harm to his relationship with his children.

Enforcement of Child Support

CURRENT POLICIES

To make fathers pay child support, states use a variety of enforcement methods. These methods work for some fathers. But for fathers with very little or no income; no work histories; little education; or physical or mental health barriers to work; these policies are not likely to increase child support payments. In fact, strict enforcement policies can even backfire by causing fathers to go underground.

In Minnesota, a combination of strategies have increased child support collections.[38] Minnesota intercepts federal and state income tax refunds and lottery winnings; reports unpaid child support to credit bureaus; requires employers to report new hires to a state office to match with child support obligations; suspends drivers' licenses for non-payment; denies passports to noncustodial parents in arrears; and issues contempt of court orders for non-payment.[39]

In Ohio, the state withholds money from noncustodial parents' incomes, including wages, pensions, workers' compensation payments, and annuities. Income withholding is assigned as part of the child support order. If payment of child support falls behind, the Ohio Office of Child Support can seek to recover the money without court action through credit reporting, suspension of professional or drivers' licenses, and wage garnishment.

State officials in Pennsylvania can suspend, refuse to renew, or deny a driver's, professional, or recreational license to a noncustodial parent who does not pay child support. Like other states, Pennsylvania can levy fines up to $500, intercept federal tax refunds, report delinquent parents to consumer credit bureaus, impose property liens, place parents on probation for up to six months, or put parents in jail for up to six months.

In Texas, the Office of the Attorney General attributes much of its success in increasing child support collections to Administrative Income Withholding. The automated system matches employer information on new hires with existing court-ordered child support cases. When new hires match child support orders, the attorney general sends income withholding orders directly to employers.

Furthermore, in Texas, the attorney general can intercept federal income tax returns and suspend driving, hunting, and fishing licenses. The Financial Institution Data Match (FIDM) program enables the attorney general's office to locate financial accounts of noncustodial fathers with past due support and to file liens against those accounts.

Almost without exception, fathers found that the courts were unfair, punitive, and disinclined to believe that low-income fathers can improve their ways.

EFFECT ON FATHERS

An overriding fear among fathers is that, by seeking services from a public agency, they could find themselves with a substantial retroactive debt or put themselves at risk of incarceration for non-payment of child support. The irony is that, according to practitioners, many of the concerned fathers are those inquiring about legal services regarding visitation, custody, and their child support obligations.

Practitioners in Columbus believe that judges are too quick to put fathers in jail for non-payment. Marilyn Thum, the court liaison to the Child Support Enforcement Agency, said that when fathers first appear in court for nonpayment of child support, judges may sentence the fathers to 10–30 days in jail. More frequently, she said, first-time offenders are given a chance to pay their arrearages; second-time offenders are likely to go to jail.

One Columbus practitioner's story illustrated how the child support system can work against fathers and their families. He told of a father who found a job and provided his social security number to his new employer. The child support office was able to track him down just as he was trying to make things right with the mother of his child. He was arrested and sent to jail; he stopped paying child support.

Ann Costilow, formerly of the Texas Attorney General's Office, believes that Texas judges understand the struggles of low-income, noncustodial fathers trying to make child support payments. She found judges to be generally sympathetic and slow to send fathers to jail for nonpayment, provided they offered plausible explanations.

Incentives for Fathers to Pay Child Support

CURRENT POLICIES

Policymakers have decided to subsidize the wages of many low-income, working mothers through the use of the Earned Income Tax Credit, which goes to custodial parents. Policymakers have not, however, extended the same subsidies to equally low-income, working fathers paying child support.

Existing policies are overly focused on fathers' financial contributions and do not encourage or value their non-financial contributions such as gifts of clothing, school supplies, vacations, or care fathers provide when mothers go to work.

Before 1996, when Congress rescinded a 1984 federal mandate, states were required to pass through $50 of child support to welfare families.[40] When Congress withdrew the mandate, it also rescinded a federal policy of sharing the cost of the pass-through with the states. Now, states decide the size of the pass-through, if any, and absorb the entire cost.

Minnesota is one of only two states in the nation that passes through every dollar of child support payments to families, although it does not disregard the payments in calculating welfare benefits. Pennsylvania and Texas provide pass-throughs of $50 and disregard the pass-through amount for purposes of welfare eligibility and public benefits. Ohio has no child support pass-through. This means that if a family receives public assistance, the father's child support arrears are owed to the state, not the family. In other words, Ohio fathers have little incentive to try to earn more or contribute more.

EFFECT ON FATHERS

Practitioners noted that the child support system can frustrate fathers by offering no apparent connection between what fathers pay and what their children receive. Simply put, pass-throughs encourage father involvement. Furthermore, payments made to states reduce fathers' ability to provide their families with in-kind benefits such as diapers, clothing, or food.

Fathers have legitimate concerns about how their child support is being spent. In Minneapolis, fathers complained that they have no way of knowing how mothers spend the child support money they provide. In Austin, fathers worried that their hard-earned money was supporting the mothers' new boyfriends and those men's children.

Practitioners in Columbus complained that courts are overly focused on the financial contributions that fathers make to children and don't count fathers' investments of time and emotional support when determining how to set child support orders. In Philadelphia, fathers recommended creating tax policies to allow low-income, noncustodial fathers to set aside part of their tax return to pay future child support for times when they do not have the money to meet their obligations.

Fathers in our study complained that they feel denied the opportunity to make up for past mistakes. One father in Minneapolis explained, "The [justice system] treats us like we don't have feelings. You're labeled as a bad father

before you even walk in the door. Even if you've changed, people will still look at you as the same person from 20 years ago."

Fathers' Obstacles to Seeing their Children

CURRENT POLICIES

Under Minnesota law, custody rights automatically go to mothers. Fathers must petition the court to challenge mothers' custody. In addition, noncustodial fathers must go to court to obtain visitation rights. One practitioner observed that it takes a certain degree of "emotional gumption" to pursue your rights in court. The practitioner went further to point out that even if a father had the fortitude to challenge the courts, often he would not be able to afford the legal costs.

Even when legal visitation orders exist, mothers have nearly total control over fathers' visitation.

While Minneapolis has a legal clinic to help fathers get custody and visitation, fathers in the other three cities said they knew of no place to get information on visitation rights or custody of their children.

Federal law prohibits the IV-D agencies, which receive federal funds for child support enforcement, from enforcing visitation. Fathers find that as a result of this lack of enforcement, relationships with their children are often determined by their relationships with their children's mothers. One father in Philadelphia said that the mother of his children would allow him to see his children only when he provided them with something she demanded.

EFFECT ON FATHERS

Fathers say that the legal system—which so often seems to work against them—should also work for them. They say they need legal services to represent them in child support rulings and to enforce visitation rights. When mothers decide that they would rather their children not spend time with their fathers, little legal recourse for fathers exists.

Fathers in Austin complained that the attorney general's office was far more diligent in enforcing child support orders than it was in enforcing visitation rights. While designated state agencies enforce child support obligations, they explained, no state agencies have the job of enforcing visitation agreements. Practitioners in the Austin focus group pointed out "If a mother takes her child out of state. . . she won't even be looked for, even if she is in direct violation of the visitation order."

Strict enforcement policies can even backfire by causing fathers to go underground.

In Minneapolis, fathers complained that the legal system denies them access to the same kind of "justice" that it offers to mothers. Fathers were further hampered if the mothers of their children applied for assistance from legal aid organizations. Mothers' prior application disqualified fathers from using the service because of conflict-of-interest laws.

One father said that the mother of his children uses his history of drug abuse and his unemployment as leverage to keep him from his children. He went on to say that he does not feel that the system has acknowledged the changes that he has made in his life by going to school and attending other self-improvement programs.

In some cases, courts assume that only mothers want to establish paternity. One father in Columbus recalled a court hearing that he had requested in his effort to establish paternity. At the hearing, the father said that the judge refused to look at him, automatically assuming that the mother was initiating the proceeding against him.

The Need for a Fathers' Focus in Welfare Reform

Given this consensus about what fathers need, why don't they get necessary services? The interviews and focus groups in the four cities produced three reasons.

First, the practitioners, fathers, and caseworkers strongly reinforced what analysts have already observed about welfare and workforce policies—that they provide little incentive for states to work with fathers.

The primary measure of the success of the 1996 welfare reform was caseload reduction. While the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 allowed states to use Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) grants to serve noncustodial parents, states turned their attention to mothers first to achieve caseload reduction goals.

Congress also authorized states to allow their courts to send nonpaying, noncustodial parents to the same work activities specified for custodial parents under TANF, such as on-the-job training or job-search assistance. Congress did not provide separate funding for these activities and as a result, few states have aggressively extended these services to noncustodial parents.

Finally, the 1997 Welfare-to-Work initiative provided funds to be used specifically for employment services for hard-to-serve welfare clients and noncustodial parents. Unfortunately, states found the program's initial guidelines difficult to comply with and failed to draw down a significant portion of the funds. The Urban Institute reports that the program, which ends in 2004, "has not reached its intended number of noncustodial parents."[41]

These policies ultimately can contribute to family stress. One program manager explained a typical scenario: "The relationship is working out. The woman gets pregnant; the man is out of work. Mom goes and applies for financial assistance but is told that if the man is in the home, he should be taking care of things. . . [and] tensions heat up." The manager suggested that what a caseworker should ask is " 'What can we do to get that man of yours working?' Now, and long term, they [caseworkers] could help them [couples] stick it out, but that is not what happens."

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Caseworkers Must Learn How to Reach Fathers

Finally, the problem of fathers' reluctance to seek services is exacerbated by the fact that many caseworkers are neither trained—nor inclined—to work with fathers.

Regardless of official agency policies, fathers' experiences getting services vary widely based on how well informed caseworkers are—and how eager they are to help. Some fathers may need to be persuaded or personally invited to use services; some may need to be convinced that caseworkers will not report them to child support agencies. And depending on the caseworkers' attitudes, training, and typical caseloads, they may not be willing to expend that extra energy.

According to fathers and practitioners, caseworkers' negative attitudes towards fathers further discourage fathers from asking for services. Caseworkers made similar observations about their colleagues, but not themselves. When asked to identify the most significant barrier to improving services for noncustodial fathers, caseworkers most frequently mentioned the existence of negative attitudes and stereotypes held by the general public and social services staff about noncustodial fathers. One caseworker said her co-workers need to see men as fathers first, rather than as gang members.

Yet in many interviews, female caseworkers mentioned their own negative experiences with men, suggesting that they might identify with female clients.

Stereotypes about low-income fathers persist at every turn. One father in Columbus provided this example: He sometimes visits his son's day care center to check on his physical and social development. The day care center did not welcome his involvement; an employee even called authorities to file a protection order against him. The father believed that the center's suspicions of him were based on gender and racial stereotypes.

The caseworkers interviewed for our study, however, did not overtly express negative attitudes towards noncustodial fathers. To the contrary, 88 percent of caseworkers said that developing policies to help low-income, noncustodial fathers become more involved with their children was very important. In addition, 72 percent said that the government should assume more responsibility in helping these fathers financially.

We looked at attitudes according to gender for all four cities in this study. Of five questions used to assess caseworker attitudes, in only one set of responses did answers differ significantly for male and female caseworkers.

In all four cities, practitioners and fathers reported that the fathers don't use services because they are uncomfortable—even fearful of—the system.

Male and female caseworkers differed about only one statement: "Many low-income women don't want their children's fathers involved with their children." While 33 percent of the female caseworkers agreed with this statement, only 17 percent of male caseworkers agreed.

Only 25 percent of caseworkers agreed with the statement, "targeting resources to mothers is important enough to justify sacrificing some benefits to fathers." This suggests that caseworkers accept the general premise that fathers need services too. Yet in many interviews, female caseworkers mentioned their own negative experiences with men, suggesting that they might identify with female clients.

Service is predicated on a philosophy that help-seeking behavior will find the agency most appropriate to the need. However, organizations working with homeless men and women have learned that this theory does not always work well in reality.

Fathers' experiences getting services vary widely based on how well informed caseworkers are—and how eager they are to help.

Working with the homeless population requires an activist approach. For example, during periods of extreme cold, organizations and agencies seeking to help homeless people have learned they must actively search to find people who will not seek shelter to prevent them from death caused by exposure to freezing temperatures.

Similarly, caseworkers in this study understand that other approaches are required to serve fathers who are unemployed because of their involvement with the criminal justice system or histories of substance abuse. The study points out that they also see the need for more services specifically geared to these fathers.

Nevertheless, most agencies continue to deliver services to fathers as an extension to the services they provide to mothers and children. There is little effort to create father-specific services, father-friendly environments, or to encourage fathers to participate in their children's development.

Perhaps, the solution to the problem of serving low-income, noncustodial fathers lies in the experiences found in the Minneapolis study. Several fathers and caseworkers commented on the benefits provided by the organizations specifically designed to assist low-income African-American men. The caseworkers described the organizations' work as "advocates" for these fathers in child support cases and helping fathers to find jobs.

The work of father-serving organizations has found a variety of collaborating partners, including the child support enforcement agencies, in a number of other states and local communities.

These collaborations could serve as a model for social welfare agencies that will be asked to serve families that increasingly include fathers. If, as studies now show, mothers want the fathers of their children involved in their lives, then it is incumbent upon these agencies to develop policies and practices to enhance their ability to assist fathers as well as mothers and their children.

There is little effort to create father specific services, father-friendly environments, or to encourage fathers to participate in their children's development.

Fathers Need to Learn to Trust the System

Fathers don't trust service providers and fear negative consequences of requesting services. In all four cities, practitioners and fathers said overwhelmingly that the primary reason fathers don't use services is that they are uncomfortable—even fearful of—the system.

Furthermore, practitioners said that clients were more likely to trust caseworkers who come from their own communities and are of the same ethnicity and gender. When caseworkers don't fit these criteria, said one interviewee, fathers fear that people who claim to be helping them will turn them in to the child support enforcement officials.

A related issue is the shortage of services. When help is limited, women and children receive priority. A Minneapolis practitioner pointed out that because of the very real shortage of affordable housing, "the county can legitimize their discounting of fathers by saying, we have to take care of homeless kids first. In some cases this is authentic, but in other cases, it is used as an excuse to put dads aside."

Practitioners and caseworkers noted that there are many instances in which existing services are so clearly designed for women that whether or not men qualify, they would never apply.

To some extent, however, this may be as much a matter of advertising as eligibility. In many cases, announcements are explicitly addressed to women, such as flyers used in the Head Start program that advertise "Childcare for Mothers."

Caseworkers hypothesized that fathers believe services are intended for women only. Others noted that fathers don't feel comfortable in agency settings, which are primarily staffed by women. In the four cities, more than 82 percent of the full-time agency caseworkers are female. Another attributed fathers' reluctance to use services to a lack of maturity, explaining that many fathers don't want to admit to needing help, particularly providing financial support for themselves and their children.

One father in Columbus said he knew of a support program where fathers with similar experiences could vent and share concerns. Yet this father said he was embarrassed to seek help: "I have such a wall up that I never really tried to check them out. I guess that's my fault."

Others mentioned cultural issues. Given that Columbus has a distinct Somali immigrant population, they pointed out that in Somali culture, males talk only to males. The issue of cultural differences was most pronounced in Minneapolis, a city of many immigrants including a significant Hmong population.

In that city, practitioners said the need for support networks is particularly acute among new immigrants. One practitioner went so far as to say that cultural crises sometimes led to suicide. Another emphasized the importance of having a counselor or social worker of the same background available to help immigrants with cultural adjustment. Yet the practitioners pointed out that there are few such resources available, and even when such resources exist, new immigrants are not likely to know where to turn for support.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

GENERALLY, POLICYMAKERS NEED TO EXPAND THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF THE role fathers play in the lives of their children, whether or not fathers are married to the mothers of their children. Fathers can be a family resource—financially, developmentally, and emotionally. Therefore policymakers should adopt policies that help fathers earn more money, resolve legal problems, and build relationships with their children when appropriate.

Congress should:

- Establish a block grant to states to provide employment, training, job retention, and support services to unemployed and low-income fathers. The services and supports provided should be analogous to employment services available to and supportive of mothers on TANF, but specifically targeted to fathers.

- Allow states to include the work of low-income fathers whose children are receiving TANF toward their TANF work participation goals. This would provide states an incentive to extend employment services to more low-income fathers.

- Require states to pass through at least $50 of child support to welfare families and resume the federal policy of sharing the cost of the pass-through with the states.

State legislatures should:

- Address the causes of nonsupport. States should devote more money to preparing fathers to work. States recognize the numerous services mothers need to get jobs: child care, education, transportation assistance, and life-skills training. State legislators have not committed enough money to supporting fathers with similar needs who want to work.

- Develop programs that create an early opportunity for fathers to connect with their children. Hospitals and prenatal clinics could employ father-outreach workers who would teach fathers about child development and the value of paternal involvement. New fathers could benefit from meeting other fathers with similar concerns and parenting goals.

- Reduce or suspend child support payments for fathers who are actively trying to increase their future job opportunities by attending certain programs: finishing high school, attending job training, or substance abuse rehabilitation programs. Currently, when fathers participate in these programs, their child support debt mounts, providing a disincentive to get the help that they need.

- Require the local offices, which administer federally funded Workforce Investment Act programs, to report on the number of low-income, noncustodial parents that they serve. Programs should also be required to report on job placement and retention rates.

- Adopt or expand child support pass-throughs. Passing along just $50 provides fathers with an incentive to pay child support and allows mothers and children to benefit directly from fathers' contributions.

State-run and nonprofit programs should:

- Target low-income fathers at greatest risk of falling behind on child support orders and connect them to education, training, and jobs. One way to do this is by identifying noncustodial parents with child support arrears and recruiting them to participate in education and training programs.

- Provide legal services to fathers. Fathers need representation in navigating the child support system and in seeking and enforcing visitation rights. Fathers want to spend time with their children and have the right to see them. And fathers who are concerned and connected with their children are more likely to meet child support obligations.

- Increase fathers' awareness of services and actively recruit them. Many caseworkers suggested that the problem is not a lack of services for fathers, but fathers' lack of knowledge about services.

- Provide life-skills classes to low-income, noncustodial fathers. Like low-income mothers, fathers need basic knowledge about such topics as budgeting and workplace etiquette.

- Provide more opportunities for fathers to interact with their children. Playgroups and outings that are father-child specific can teach fathers how to improve their relationships with their children.

- Shift social services agencies' focus to redefine the family unit to include fathers as well as mothers and children. Fathers report that they feel agencies are hostile towards them as noncustodial parents.

- Create services specifically targeted to fathers. Fathers are often reluctant to use services that they believe are designed for mothers only and are staffed primarily by women.

- Hire more male caseworkers. Fathers say that they would be more inclined to get services if more caseworkers were male and from their own communities.

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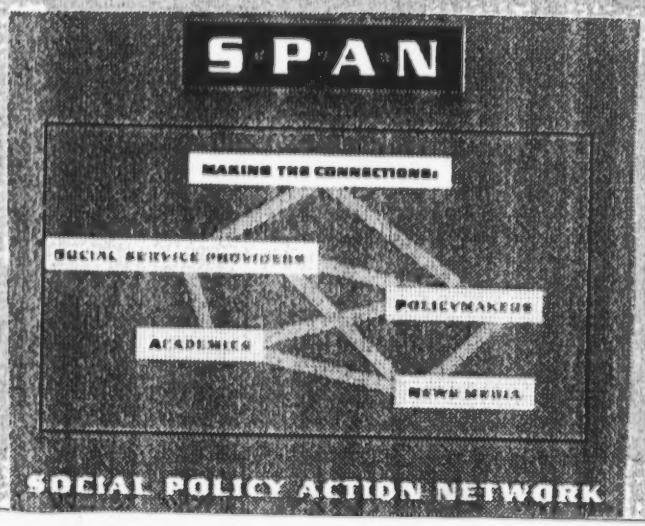

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